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Book Review | *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist, Neo Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*

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***Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist, Neo Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*; Thomas Nagel. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 128 pp. + index. \$24.95 hc. ISBN 978-0-19-991975-8**

In some ways, this is an important book. In some ways it is a very disappointing one. It is important — one is tempted to add: “obviously” — because it raises a series of philosophical concerns that are very deep. Indeed, perhaps it is truly not *possible* to wonder about the adequacy of the naturalist accounts we are familiar with on a more fundamental level than that taken up by Nagel. It is very disappointing because, surprisingly, after all these years, there is remarkably little exploration of the degree to which these problems, or their apparent profundity, may be driven by a conception of “explanation” that is quite idiosyncratic and by no means right. I am not saying that the conception of “explanation” that Nagel employs to bludgeon naturalism is wrong. Not yet. I am saying that there is virtually no attention to the question as to whether it might be, or, more subtly, whether it is something of a construction, by no means a natural or transparent fact in the world. The subtitle of Nagel’s book, as everyone must surely know, is “why the materialist neo Darwinian conception of nature is almost certainly false.” When one thinks about the conception of explanation that drives so much of the argument (for it is against that conception of course that materialism, naturalism and Darwinian accounts all fail), one is tempted to add to the subtitle: “if you have a sensibility like mine.” Again, it may be that the conception Nagel relies on is defensible, or the right one. I am disinclined to think so, of course, and why I think this will occupy us below. But that is a separate matter. At the least, there is a substantive gap in the argument: what clearly should have been examined is not. The background assumptions that underwrite what *counts* as a good or adequate explanation are not subjected to any critical scrutiny. And this is a deeply frustrating fact. When the

reader finishes this book, chances are, he or she will be wondering most aggressively about what Nagel has *not* talked about.

I think there is a certain amount of mystery attending the idea — not just Nagel’s idea, but *any* idea — of “explanation.” By this I mean: that there is just no way the contingencies of nature can ever appear to be anything but, well, contingent; they will never quite approximate, let alone replicate, the transparency we think we have in abstract conceptual argument. That is not nature’s problem. In time, it may not even be ours. We may be like teenagers gripped, now, by the fact of our mortality, and in time we may just get over it.

Actually, I think there are significant bits of the philosophical community who are in that more mature place right now. From what I can gather, almost all of the *scientific* community is. That is, most if not all scientists I know find it hard to understand just what Nagel is so exercised about, just what is so terribly *wrong* with the sort of explanation the naturalist, particularly when within biology, hopes to offer. Consciousness may indeed be very hard to explain. So is the origin of the universe, or even, for that matter, what it means to speak of the universe as “beginning,” or “having boundaries” (which talk of the origin of the universe must implicate). But consciousness is *impossible* to explain(N), where “explain(N)” is “explain” as Nagel understands it. That follows from “explain(N)” as much as it does from anything special about consciousness. And so for this argument to work, we need to be persuaded that “explain(N)” is really the right way to understand the idea of explanation, is somehow instinct in the ordinary conception, or presupposed in whatever conception may be taken as largely non-controversial. My complaint at this point is not that Nagel’s argument to this effect is not as convincing as it needs to be. My complaint is that this issue, this argument, is not *taken up at all* in *Mind and Cosmos*. I think this is because the conception of explanation that drives Nagel, underwriting his dissatisfaction with any neurological explanation of our conscious states, just seems so natural, so obvious to Nagel that it is unnecessary to explore it. And this is a mistake. It is very much not. To the extent the reader feels that the conception of explanation that Nagel employs is artificial or idiosyncratic, to that extent the reader will also be unconvinced by Nagel’s argument that consciousness cannot be satisfactorily explained. I think there may be quite a few more readers of this sort out there than Nagel appreciates.

In what follows I will begin by rehearsing Nagel’s argument against materialism as it applies to consciousness. However, as the remarks above suggest, because this argument is intertwined with a certain conception of explanation, what an explanation should be like, that conception will be our subject there too. There are other arguments in *Mind and Cosmos* regarding other things, arguments against materialist or naturalist accounts of intentionality, rationality and moral value too. Indeed, when Nagel’s arguments are all laid

out, one might reasonably ask what the materialist account is *not* embarrassed by, why everything not enumerated in a physics text book is not added to the charge sheet. Is it merely consciousness, intentionality, rationality and moral value the materialist fails to explain? Why not post-modernism, tragedy, negligence, jokes and *Oklahoma!* as well? Perhaps this last remark is unfair — on any account, *Oklahoma!* is probably a miracle. But it does seem the materialist has much to be ashamed of. That is, if the demands Nagel makes upon his argument can be justified.

Let us start with some remarks of Nagel's.

But if the mental is not merely physical, then it cannot be fully explained by physical science. And then, as I shall argue, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that those aspects of our physical constitution cannot be fully explained by physical science either. If evolutionary biology is a physical theory—as it is generally taken to be—then it cannot account for the appearance of consciousness and of other phenomenon that are not physically reducible. So if mind is a product of biological evolution—if organisms with mental life are not miraculous anomalies but an integral part of nature—then biology cannot be a purely physical science. (14, 15)

It is trivially true that if there are conscious organisms capable of reason, the possibility of such organisms must have been there from the beginning. But if we believe in a natural order, then something in the world that eventually gave rise to rational beings must explain this possibility. Moreover, to explain not merely the possibility but the actuality of rational beings, the world must have properties that make their appearance not a complete accident: in some way the likelihood must have been latent in the nature of things. ...Such an explanation would complete the pursuit of intelligibility by showing how the natural order is disposed to generate beings capable of comprehending it. (86)

To qualify as a genuine explanation of the mental, an emergent account must be in some way systematic. It cannot just say that each mental event or state supervenes on the complex physical state of the organism on which it occurs. That would be a kind of brute fact that does not constitute an explanation but rather calls for an explanation...I think we can imagine a higher order psycho-physical theory that would make the connection cease to seem like a gigantic set of inexplicable correlations and would instead make it begin to seem intelligible...Still, this kind of higher-level theory, however empirically accurate, seems unsatisfactory as a final answer to the constitutive question. If emergence is the whole truth, it implies that mental states are present in the organism as a whole ...without any grounding in the

elements that constitutes the organism, except for the physical character of those elements that permits them to be arranged in the complex form that, according to the higher level theory, connects the physical with the mental. That such purely physical elements, when combined in a certain way, should necessarily produce a state of the whole that is not constituted out of the properties and relations of the physical parts still seems like magic, even if the higher order psychophysical dependencies are quite systematic. (55, 56)

The existence of consciousness is both one of the most familiar and one of the most astounding things about the world. No conception of the natural order that does not reveal it as something to be expected can aspire even to the outline of completeness. (53)

Suppose there were a general psychophysical theory that...would allow us to understand for any type of physical organism why it did or did not have conscious life, and if it did, why it had the specific type of conscious life that it had. This could be called a non-historical theory of consciousness. It would accomplish task (1) [it would explain why specific organisms have the conscious life they have]. But I believe that even if such a powerful non-historical theory were conjoined with a purely physical theory of how those organisms arose through evolution, the result would not be an explanation of the appearance of consciousness as such. [!] It would not accomplish task (2) [explaining why conscious organisms arose in the history of life on earth]. It would still leave the appearance of consciousness as an accidental and therefore unexplained concomitant of something else—the genuinely intelligible physical history. (51)

I hope the reader gets the idea. Powerful, suggestive, strikingly original thoughts run alongside some very extraordinary, and questionable, claims. Following Nagel, let's distinguish first between historical explanations and constitutive ones. Historical explanations seek to show why some state of affairs occurred in time, or at a particular moment in time. When we try to explain why the dinosaurs disappeared however many millions of years ago, we give a historical explanation. Constitutive explanations seek to identify the timeless causal story as it were; the causal law. When we try to explain why plutonium deteriorates and sand does not, we give a constitutive explanation.

Running like a thread through both conceptions of explanations however is this idea that an explanation, to be satisfactory, must present the outcome as prefigured, as instinct in the antecedent state of affairs, whether this is understood as antecedent in time, or within the framework of some temporally neutral causation story. When this requirement is imposed

on historical stories, the result is that there can be no place for contingency in any such story. When this requirement is imposed on any temporally neutral causal story, we cannot, by definition as it were, help but find any talk of higher order or emergent properties fundamentally mysterious. (Since, by definition, such properties are not to be found or prefigured in the underlying ones—*that's why* we call them “higher order.”) And so, with one blow, Nagel has robbed us of two of the most reliable and useful tools in our explanation-story tool box—the possibility of introducing contingency into our historical stories (“because the asteroid happened to hit the earth, the dinosaurs disappeared”) and the possibility of explaining phenomena by reference to higher order properties that do not translate or reduce to whatever material components happen to instantiate such properties (“he left the room because he was bored”). It should be no surprise that so much of the world around us now threatens to become *so mysterious!*

Analogous points apply to analogous ideas. To be sure, there is a sense in which “the mental is not merely physical.” But Nagel does not say which among the many senses on offer he is actually committed to here. There is the original, “classic,” Nagel, the very ambitious story first put forward in “What Is It Like To Be A Bat?”: that there are “subjective facts” out there beyond the reach of any objective story. Nagel wisely refrains from making *that* argument again, for to speak of “facts” that are “not part of the objective world” is to be committed to epiphenomenalism; such facts cannot then be said to have any causal potency — something Frank Jackson was honest enough to see and foolish enough to defend. For surely if it isn't the way the sunset looks that causes me to pull over and get a better look at it, or if it isn't the way the whiskey tastes that causes me to have another sip, then everything I know is false and it's the end of the world. Perhaps all this *really* means — that “the mental is not merely the physical”— is that once the naturalistic property story has been completed, there is still a further thing to talk about, our *experience of* such properties, and what that is like. There is having a headache, being in physical state M, and then there is the way the headache *feels*, and how we would *describe* the way it feels. Sure; fine. But it hardly follows from *this*, i.e., that there is this further thing to speak about, that this thing we speak about is not amenable to a physical explanation. Consider: our responses to Schumann are “not merely physical” either (in this second, innocuous sense — they can hardly be described or captured in purely physical property talk), but there almost certainly is a very good empirical explanation for why this jumpy music, with its unexpected key changes, causes the particular responses that it does. It hardly follows from the fact that the thing in question must be *described* in an irreducibly non-physical vocabulary that the properties such vocabulary speaks of (“the jumpy, nervous tension you get when listening to Schumann's music” for example) cannot be helpfully located and explained by reference to the physical story that seems to generate them.

But Nagel goes further. Naturalistic explanations must be of a certain *kind*; if they are not, then they are not really good explanations at all. Since in the end, the world is through and through physical (in the naturalistic world view we are considering), the language of naturalistic explanation must tie directly to the language of physics. Any other sort of property talk is suspicious, unsatisfactory. Recall:

That such purely physical elements, when combined in a certain way, should necessarily produce a state of the whole that is not constituted out of the properties and relations of the physical parts still seems like magic, even if the higher order psychophysical dependencies are quite systematic. (55, 56)

That remark, “seems like magic,” for me, truly gives the game away. For here we get to the heart of the strangeness of the argument — a conception of explanation in virtue of which higher order properties, properties that do perfectly good work in explanatory stories, come to be deemed intrinsically mysterious. Their use, and our reliance on their use, cannot really be justified *because they fail to be prefigured in the material story that underlies them*. They are “magic” (why not say “voodoo”?). If higher order properties are “magic,” just so much hand waving, not part of genuine scientific talk, it is no surprise then that the sciences will be described, in Nagel’s hands, in ways that leave such properties out. And so it is also then no surprise that we wind up with a characterization of biology that is through and through materialist, reductive, an off shoot of physics (it could not be a “real” science any other way). Thus, Nagel cannot see how it is just *these* sorts of properties that make biology non-reductive *now*. Consider “parasite” or “symbiosis,” or “function” or “fitness” or “selection” or “sex” (there is a much longer list, but this will do for a start). All of these terms do perfectly good work in all sorts of explanatory stories; none of them, needless to say, are reducible to physics, and so can be thought of as prefigured in any purely material story of the sort the physicist would tell. Nagel may be right that a purely materialist or reductive story will not be satisfactory, but Fodor made *this* point *years* ago. And, following Fodor, biology has been *instantiating* this point for far longer.

Of course, there are a great many puzzles surrounding our presumably legitimate talk of such properties. But then *this* is the issue that must be taken up in some detail — what is the status of the special sciences, what is the status of these “natural kind” terms that do not reduce to any disjunction of their physical instantiations? How can we make sense of these terms, or if we are realists about such stuff, these properties, that do, apparently, underwrite so many perfectly good predictions and counterfactuals and yet resist “translation” into the language of physics? Obviously, if consciousness (or rationality or intentionality) is to be explained in any way, it will be via some pretty heavy reliance on properties of this sort.

Ruling them out from the start as insufficiently well-bred to be a part of “proper” science gets us nowhere.

Two further, final points: Nagel often says that a good historical explanation of consciousness would show how it is that consciousness (or rationality or intentionality) was *inevitable*. And it is just this that the present stories fail to do. Given the fundamental particles plus the fundamental forces as material science presents these, there is no way consciousness can be seen to be in any way inevitable or necessary. This is true; given the fundamental physical story at say the time of the big bang, consciousness is anything but “inevitable.” But Nagel should pause and consider how *rare* such things are in the universe. We have no evidence of consciousness or intentionality anywhere else. One might say: to the contrary, any account that presented consciousness (say) as the *inevitable* result of fundamental forces would face the daunting difficulty of explaining why it was not more commonly found everywhere. Nagel never considers this difficulty. A healthy sense of the near miraculous nature of the thing to be explained braided into our explanations would appear to be more faithful to the data.

Finally, there runs throughout *Mind and Cosmos* a largely unexamined distinction regarding different sorts of causal explanations. Perhaps it might be more accurate to say this is a distinction in Nagel’s *attitude towards* different causal explanations. Some causal explanations seem to Nagel to be essentially transparent. The outcome, given the antecedent conditions and the relevant laws, seems undeniable, and undeniably *necessary*. Causal accounts of why water freezes at a certain temperatures given its molecular structure provide a standard example. By contrast, other causal claims seem “brute,” murky, and saturated with contingency. Claims about consciousness or intentionality supervening upon certain sorts of systems or types of organic material would seem to be like this. The first (no surprise) is a real explanation in good standing. The second is very much not. And indeed, it is because of this, the inadequacy of the second sort of explanation, that Nagel even considers adding to the naturalist story some sort of atomic mental component there from the beginning, a kind of mental monad. (This is what he means when he says in the remark above that biology then cannot be a purely physical science.) Nagel concedes the obscurity of the idea and does not seriously defend it, but that he introduces it at all shows how Nagel *conceives* “transparency” in explanations. Whatever disadvantages to this move there might be, at least then the consciousness we get at the end of the story would be generated by components credited with some sort of mental nature from the start. We would have the *kind* of explanation that we must always ask for — I am tempted to add: a near medieval one, where nothing that is not “contained” in the premises can find its way into the conclusion.

I am not saying that our accounts of consciousness and our accounts of how it is that water has the properties that it has do not differ in any way. My complaint is rather that Nagel does not take up the degree to which these differences may rest on something else besides some enduring metaphysical fact. I am happy to concede that the connection between the properties of water molecules and the fact that water freezes at a certain temperature does seem “transparent” to us, inevitable and even necessary, and that the connection between certain underlying organic material and consciousness seems anything but. Fine. But it is not clear that this sense of things, this sense of a difference, is tied to a defect in the second sort of explanation or to any difference in actual contingency. Perhaps the sense of transparency or necessity we feel when offering the first sort of story stems from the wealth of additional theory it is tied to, the many explanations it seamlessly connects up with, and so forth. We are comfortable with these claims, and we can elaborate upon them endlessly. But they are still thoroughly contingent for all that. They do not name logical or conceptual connections, the perfectly legitimate Quine-like maneuver of our deciding to *treat* them as such once they are well established notwithstanding. (“By ‘water’ I just *mean* ‘H₂O’”. And of course one can talk this way if one wants to.) Perhaps, with the elaboration of further theory concerning neurology and consciousness, the sense of asymmetry across these cases might well disappear; it might certainly significantly diminish. Perhaps the contingency that is always there in all causal claims will come to seem less interesting, less important. When the connections are sufficiently systematic, when the predictions and counterfactuals sufficiently robust, the easy going back and forth between causal and conceptual claims we have with all well-established science may well arise here too. Of course, I cannot know this. But Nagel argues from a position that takes a certain sort of felt difference when looking at these two stories as revealing a deep, never to be altered fact about the world, or about our ability to explain bits of it. And this move from an inner sense to an objective fact is precisely what must be taken up and defended. Nagel really seems to have forgotten how contingent causal explanation is everywhere. We can just get very good at tracing out the *consequences* of our contingent universe with systematic brio. Also — and this is another point Nagel never takes up — our consciousness is of course very closely tied up with our identity, with who we are. Any causal explanation *here* will always risk a sense of vertigo. Causal explanations of love are not so dissimilar. They seem at odds with the felt depth of the phenomena as experienced. This is not to be denied. But we have come to be quite at ease (in a way an earlier generation of Victorians would not have been) with the idea that love, for all its sense of felt magic, might very well have deep roots in our biology and admit of a very robust causal explanation. Nagel may well be the eminent Victorian of our time.

Value

The conception of value that Nagel defends in *Mind and Cosmos*, and his argument for why this conception poses a problem for a Darwinian account, is not likely to receive much independent attention. But for anyone interested in meta-ethics, his views on these matters, as they are put forward here, are fascinating. Nagel was for me at one point one of the most subtle, and helpful, writers on how to think about morality and moral objectivity. Here he defends a position that is flatly incredible.

Nagel begins in exactly the right place. He is, to use the vexed terminology of our day, a “realist” about value, but he notes that the right way to be a realist is to be a certain sort of autonomist, to resist the idea the world needs any further thing to make certain sorts of evaluative claims true. The subjectivist and the quasi realist hold that evaluative claims are to be explained by reference to certain kinds of psychological states, attitudes, or “stances.” This is a mistake. Certain moral claims (I put it this way because not all claims about moral matters will have this status) are true in virtue of their content, in virtue of what they represent as important, and in virtue of the connection such claims have to similar claims that admit of justification in a similar way. The idea that truth or justification here requires any sort of additional “ontology” is a pernicious one — the subjectivist easily, and cheaply, looks good by smugly rejecting this artificial requirement — and must be strenuously rejected. Nagel writes:

The dispute between realism and subjectivism is not about the contents of the universe. It is a dispute about the order [or nature—SR] of normative explanation. Realists believe that moral and other evaluative judgments can often be explained by more general or basic evaluative truths together with the facts that bring them into play...But they do not believe the evaluative element in such a judgment can be explained by anything else. That there is a reason to do what will avoid grievous harm to a sentient creature, is, in a realist view, one of the kinds of things that can be true in itself, and not because of something of different kind is true...But although realism does not add anything to the catalog of entities or properties that a subjectivist believes to exist in the world, it does hold that certain truths that subjectivists think have to be grounded in something else do not have to be so grounded but are just true in their own right. (102, 103)

So far; so good. Indeed, I think this is in fact an excellent statement of how the realist conceives of justification. But then Nagel turns to something else entirely: how might our ability to *grasp* true moral claims, something we undeniably can do, fit with a fundamentally Darwinian account of our development? Nagel draws on the arguments of

Sharon Street here, and like Street, he finds a problem where there is none in part by construing “moral truth” in excessively Platonist ways (a claim I hope to make clearer in the discussion that follows). Street thinks the plausibility of the Darwinian account poses a problem for moral realism — how could we think that the story that explains how it is that we cherish our children, bond in tribes and shun promise breakers (the raw material that we then construct into collective life) *also* just happens to deliver creatures that can detect moral truths that, if we are realists, we must think of as independent of our psychological states? It seems incredible, and, from a Darwinian point of view, pointless. It does not matter from a Darwinian point of view whether pain is *really* bad and pleasure is *really* good. Pleasure might, however it appears to us, be bad, pain good, or both valueless. Value realism, whatever is truly true apart from how things appear, is irrelevant to *that* story. All that matters is that pain *avoidance* plays a role in how we have adapted to the world. The true evaluative status of pain, if it even has one, has no bearing on the Darwinian account of how we have come to regard pain as we do, of how we have come to get along. This is very much *unlike* the *factual* story. Here it is crucial, if our story is to reach its happy ending, that the way things appear is pretty much *exactly* how they are. If our spatial representations were not essentially accurate, we would fall off cliffs, not snare game, and fall into the paws of saber tooth tigers. But value realism, unlike empirical realism, plays no role in the adaptive story. Nagel more or less agrees to this account of the conflict, but then argues to the opposite conclusion: given that we *can* grasp such truths, and that such truths, understood as independent of our habits, are irrelevant from the standpoint of a Darwinian story, there must be more to the story than what the Darwinian can say.

[T]he natural Darwinian explanation of the motives and dispositions that form the starting points of our value judgments and which we can then modify through the process of reflective equilibrium is that they have contributed to reproductive fitness not only by aiding individual survival but by promoting the nurture and care of children, deterring aggression and making social cooperation possible. The mind independent truth of the resulting judgments has no role to play in the Darwinian story; so far as natural selection is concerned, if there were such a thing as mind independent moral truths, those judgments could be systematically false. (107)

A Darwinian account of visual perception entails that it gives us information about the external world and that the evil demon hypothesis is false. A Darwinian account of the origin of our basic desires and aversions by contrast has no implications as to whether they are generally reliable perceptions of judgment independent value, or whether there is indeed such a thing...So I am in agreement with Street that, from a Darwinian perspective, the hypothesis of value realism is superfluous—a wheel that spins without being attached to anything. From a Darwinian perspective, our

impressions of value, if construed realistically, are completely groundless. And if that is true for our most basic responses, it also true for the entire elaborate structure of value and morality that is build up from them by practical reflection and cultural development—just as scientific realism would be undermined if we abandoned a realistic interpretation of the perceptual experiences on which science is based...Nevertheless, I remain convinced that pain is really bad, and not just something we hate, and that pleasure is really good, and not just something we like. (109, 110)

In the first place, I find the idea that “value realism” requires a strong metaphysical realism about the “goodness of pleasure” or the “badness of pain” extraordinary; truly, almost crazy. Morality is not about “detecting” some spooky entity, “goodness” “out there” (or one might say, “everywhere”). Morality is about devising a system of cooperation and conflict resolution that has a chance of meeting a reasonable conception of objectivity. Consider utilitarianism in this regard. I think Mill was about as robust an objectivist about morality as one could ask for. I cannot imagine a better candidate for the honorific title “moral realist.” Certainly, under Mill’s utilitarianism, there are objectively right answers about what to do, how to treat others, what our obligations are, and so forth. (Answers that are true independently of what any particular person professes to believe, certainly.) But it is just mad to think we have to care about whether pleasure is “really” good, pain “really” bad. What counts is that this *sense* of goodness, this *appearance* of goodness, this sense that each person typically has regarding the objects of his own desire, be *equally respected*, and that the moral calculus appropriately mirror or respect this fact. It is the equal respect of persons that counts, not the metaphysical correctness of their particular judgments or impressions. Indeed, we can, as utilitarians, be absolutely indifferent to assigning pain any metaphysical status at all and still be robust moral realists. After all, in any conflict between G.E. Moore and Jeremy Bentham, their desires would be counted equally in the utilitarian calculus, though one holds objectivist views about his judgments and the other subjectivist ones. They cannot both be right about *that*, of course, but so what? It does not matter who is right about the value of poetry, for example, or pushpin, or even if neither is. We can be objectivists about what fairness requires, or what justice requires all the same. This seems so *obvious*. Why can’t Nagel see it? For all that we *must* care about is that persons, as a matter of fact, do care about something, not whether in doing so they “hit upon” some “value” that is “true” apart from the judgment that claims it so.

My point here is not unconnected to a further criticism. In the passage above, Nagel suggests that our judgments might, when developed, even be said to lead to a moral scheme that makes widespread social cooperation possible (and why not add: stable and transparent) and *still* such a scheme might for all that be systematically “false.” I find this suggestion

simply extraordinary, almost a *reductio* for an excessively Platonist construal of “value realism.” I am reminded of a very astute criticism Richard Wollheim once made against the institutional theory of art, the idea that whether an object was an object of art depended entirely on the say so of some institution. Wollheim pointed out that we could, consistent with this view, be able to say all sorts of properties were *true* of a novel (say), that it was, for example, well written, well plotted, imaginative, insightful, original, and so forth, and it *still* be an “open question” whether it was “a work of art,” because the relevant institution had not yet spoken. Here too, we seem to be able to say of a moral scheme that it happens to make stable cooperation possible; let us further say that it does so because it offers those within the scheme equal consideration and respect, and it does so in ways each can on reflection endorse...you get the idea. Just add as many accolades as you like — and it still “could be” “false.” Why not? These “values” that Nagel worries about it would seem can have nothing to do with the practical task of social cooperation, since *that* story, however rich, however Kantian, could be made congruent with the Darwinian one. So let us describe that story, the cooperation, in as rich a normative vocabulary as you like. Even in that society that is in compliance with Rawls’ two principles of justice, it appears we have no guarantee that we have, in constructing such a world, coincided with these “values” after all.

But I take it as now obvious that we have here, in this argument, construed “morality” or “goodness” in exactly the wrong way, the way of the extreme intuitionist, where the idea of goodness is conceptually quite separate from human activity, and we can then, consistent with this separation, imagine the most transparent success in regulating such activity on the most egalitarian of terms and it “still” be “possible” that such a scheme is “wrong” or “false.” One wonders: what exactly is this stuff out there we may or may not be able to “detect” getting *right*? What do these values that we might be missing, busy as we are complying with the difference principle, *do*, exactly? I find it extraordinary that Nagel, so astute a commentator on Rawls and Dworkin, could approach the issue of moral objectivity, of moral realism, without considering the conception of objectivity that ties it to success at devising a conception of cooperation among free and equal persons, or more accurately, persons who conceive of themselves as such. Not only is that the more plausible conception of moral objectivity in its own right, it is of course the conception that dissolves any conflict between a Darwinian account of our development and our capacity to grasp morally objective principles. I guess *that’s* why it gets no attention. One might put the point in a Talmudic vein as follows: the essence of morality is just to treat the other as oneself. And to this one might add: how hard is that? I mean, our cognitive development might have stopped such that we ended up half as smart as we presently are, and as a result, all sorts of truths of physics would be invisible to us. But I would think we would still be smart enough to be moral, and to grasp the grounds of such morality. It’s not so hard Tom, and it certainly

isn't that mysterious. Only a weird construal of "moral realism" or "moral facts" could have it otherwise.

What Does It All Mean?

Nagel has written a genuinely original and provocative book. But in the end it is also an unsatisfying one. His arguments are driven by conceptions of causation and science that are I think it is fair to say, somewhat idiosyncratic. As a result, explanations that are not straightforwardly tied to the language of physics (i.e., biology in so far as it is a special science) do not get adequately considered, and explanations that employ higher order properties in a central way are characterized as magical, unsatisfactory. He does not, in my view, seem to appreciate that contingency infects even the most systematic accounts of how the world happens to be, and he seems to be unable to imagine that a phenomenon so central to our lives and sense of ourselves might, for all that, be truly rare, and so not rightly thought as the "inevitable" result of the forces that govern our universe. But it is not just these *views* that I want to criticize, though obviously, I do think they are mistaken. It is rather their insufficient defense that is frustrating. The particular moves he makes on these issues (seeing causal explanation as satisfactory only if the properties in the outcome are somehow prefigured in the underlying states, for example) do not receive anything like the full exploration or defense that they deserve. He does turn a central issue of mind—how we are to explain consciousness?—into an issue for cosmology: how are we to fit mind into the most general scientific accounts we now think true? And this is a truly philosophically important thing to have done, to have framed the issue in these terms and so to have added to the debate about consciousness in this way. I just wish he had pursued this project with a bit more open mindedness towards those intuitions that are different from the ones he has.